
Point of view

More blessed to receive?

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There are many strange examples of foggy self-justification. One of the worst comes from those doctors who justify their earnings on the basis of the storm and stress of their job. 'We deserve our pile,' they say 'as compensation for the burdens of our work.'

Now I am not a foe to those who like to make lists of the liabilities of medical practice. Most reasonable people admit them: the broken nights and the exposure to suffering and sickness; the incessant emotional demands and the stresses on the doctor's family, and so on. Certainly, I admit that measured in financial terms alone, the just return for these trials would be hard to determine. I expect a union negotiator could win a substantial wage for doctors.

The thing that pains me and enrages many other doctors is that the profession as a whole is stained by those who act as if money were the only valid reward from practice.

I see it this way. One of the truths of medical practice is that those shabby doctors who are most preoccupied with money are either inadequate as doctors, or, more commonly, practise the sort of short-changing medicine that brings us all into disrepute.

In a rather perverse way some doctors who have imperfect personalities have tried to win the acceptance of their colleagues by acting as professional crusaders for more cash. Any humanity they have can be bought and sold.

They degrade themselves and they debilitate our profession.

Perhaps it is because they rarely receive the other returns that come from caring for patients that they make grasping their goal and god.

Now I do not want to fire at professional greed in this note. That needs greater guns and I'm keeping my powder dry. Instead, I want to reveal the rewards of practice that some doctors cherish most, because I believe these prizes are the incentives which should compensate for the mighty demands of medical practice.

If you ask a doctor 'Which have been the most memorable moments of your professional life?', some will confess it was the excellence of a diagnosis

that relieved suffering; others, a therapeutic success that saved a life. Occasionally it is the triumph of a significant medical discovery, or a distinction awarded by one's colleagues.

But most commonly there dwells in one's past a cherished recollection of some small kindness or gratitude which a patient offered in return for your care. To this one's memory returns with a strange sense of humility and gratification. Humility, because such gestures always bespeak an expression of trust, and gratification because they are a response to some human restoration.

The patient's improvement may not have been physical. The things a doctor does to lift a patient's spirit or to encourage his resolve to overcome a stress are just as important. So is that sense of 'someone there' to whom the patient can turn during those moments of chaos when one's world seems to be disintegrating.

The doctor's reward need not be material. A direct gaze from appreciative eyes, the hand placed over the handshake, or the face open with trust: they all speak intensely.

Occasionally something special happens. A single flower found on one's desk after the patient has hurried away. A gruff hand shoves a bottle at you, wrapped in brown paper roughened by the twist of diffident tenderness. Sometimes it's a cake made, a duck ready for roasting. A bag of spuds 'dug out meself with me one bloody leg'.

I've always felt there's something fundamental about a gift of food. A gesture of someone's desire that you must survive.

These gifts are valued by the doctor because they are symbolic of the patient's gratitude that you have, in some way, treated them as a special individual. Special in that they feel *their* concern was your greatest preoccupation.

Just as the patient's memory of the doctor who offered a thoughtfulness tailored specifically for him is held most dear, so too a gratitude that is specially chosen or directed to the doctor is valued supremely. The reasons are identical. The mutual reward is beautifully appropriate.

Sometimes the reward is indirect. For example, the way the world's colours seem richer when viewed through the prism of a patient's courage. The body that bears its burden without complaint always fortifies the doctor and reduces the weight of his or her own worries.

The return which means most is *never* money; yet we rarely admit it.

One of the treasured customs of our profession has been the courtesy that one doctor would never charge another for a medical service. Some still adhere to it. But many adopt the attitude that 'because we're all insured now, just send the bill.' I suppose it's easier to write out a cheque than to choose a special gift.

Over the past few years many words have been spoken at the many meetings I have attended about money and medicine. In every hall and hospital a lot has been said about freedom of practice, sessional payments, government intrusion into practice, and so on. Much has been mouthed about the returns due to doctors. But I have never heard one word uttered that confessed what many doctors feel is the

most endearing form of remuneration: a human gesture of appreciation.

A savage question to ask would be, how many doctors would accept this gift in place of a fee? I suppose it would be Quixotic to even think that some would prefer payment in kind. The question is never asked, 'If doctors deserve a special return for their work, why do those rewards need so exclusively to be economic ones?'

If doctors really hold dear the professional rewards of practice above money, why don't they act with that conviction? If they don't value them, then they would please those of us who do by leaving the profession they discredit.

It is the same in practice as it is in life: the richness of one's return is equal to one's human concern.